



Welsh Naming Patterns

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History of Welsh Naming Patterns

Celtic Connections to Welsh Language and Names

- The Welsh language derives from the Celts.
- By the 6th century AD, a branch of this language had evolved into Old Welsh.
- Some Welsh names are more than 2,000 years old.

Welsh Surnames

- The development of surnames in Wales reflects the history of a small country with its own social structure in which the kinship group was very important.
- Welsh generally knew the names of their male ancestors for several generations, perhaps six or seven, each generation divided by *ap*, forming a patronymic string of names. Proverb – “As long as a Welshman’s pedigree.”
- Fixed surnames were generally adopted by the Welsh gentry in the 16th century and by yeomen in the 17th and 18th centuries.

Traditional Welsh Names Through the Centuries

Early Medieval Times:

Dafydd
Gruffydd
Hywel
Llywelyn
Madog
Morgan
Owain
Rhys

Late Thirteenth Century:

Cynddelw
Cynwric
Ednyfed
Einion
Gronow
Heilyn
Iorwerth
Ithel
Madyrn
Rhirid
Tegwared
Tudur
Wasmihangel

By the Fifteenth Century:

Dafydd/David	Morgan
Edward	Morus
Gruffud	Owain

Henry/Harry	Rhydderach
Huw	Rhys
Hywel	Richard
Ieuan	Robert
Jenkin	Roger
James	Thomas
John	Tudur/Tudor
Lewys	Watkin
Llywelyn	William/Gwilym
Madog	
Maredudd	

Welsh Naming Patterns and Patronymics

In Wales, given names and surnames are intricately related.

- Individuals were identified by the name of their father. Patronymic surnames are based on the father's given name.
- Generally, ap or ab was added between the child's name and the father's name.
- The Welsh for son is mab, often written in Old Welsh as map, cognate with the Irish mac.
- A process of mutation produced ab (usually before vowels) and ap (before consonants).
- Women were also known by their father's name, using the word ferch or verch, meaning "daughter of."

A variation to Welsh patronymics was the naming custom of naming the eldest soon after his paternal grandfather, and the eldest daughter after her paternal grandmother. The second son and daughter took the names of their maternal grandparents and the third son and daughter the names of their parents.

Welsh ways of adopting a surname:

- Father's Given Name – Using the father's given name as the surname was the most common.
- Father's Surname – Sometimes a son was given his father's surname. This is done today.
- Grandfather's Given name – Occasionally a family adopted the grandfather's given name as a surname.
- Maternal Grandfather's Name – In some areas of Wales, the mother named her first-born son after her own family, usually her father.
- Grandmother's Name – An individual's surname could be based on the grandmother's family name.

Names from a possessive patronymic

Davies, Evans, Gittinus, Griffiths, Gwatkins, Gwilliams, Istans, Jenkins, Jones, Williams.

Examples of ab and ap influenced names:

Bevan
Bowen
Probert

Price
Prichard
Protheroe
Powell
Pugh

Daughters were shown as *verch/vch* and the surnames Critchett and Kedward are examples of names coming from *verch/vch*. Creese comes from *verch* Rhys.

Other Ways of Naming in Wales

There are fewer names in Wales based on places, nicknames, or occupations because of the prevalence of Welsh patronymics.

Locality Based Names

Descriptive Names

Nicknames and Occupational Names

More Examples of Welsh Names

Bowen

The name Bowen comes from “ab Owen” and the surname is spread throughout the middle and southern portions of Wales, particularly Pembrokeshire, but is almost totally absent from most of North Wales.

Davies

Davies is the most common name that derives from the given name, David. It has its strongest presence in Cardiganshire.

Edwards

The name Edwards means “Edward’s son.” The Welsh version of Edward was lowerth but was, more often than not anglicized to Edward. Greatest frequency of the name is in Merionethshire and Denbighshire.

Ellis

This name derives from the forename Elisedd. In speech the “dd” was dropped and sounded like Ellis or Elise. The name is found in significant concentration across northern Wales.

Evans

Evans is one of the most common Welsh patronymic surnames as the name is derived from “Ieuan,” Welsh name for John. While the name can be found throughout Wales, there are great concentrations of the name in Cardiganshire and Montgomeryshire.

Gwynne/Wynn

Gwynne derives from Old Welsh “Gwyn” which means light or fair. It was used to describe someone who was fair-haired and had a pale complexion. The surname Wynn came from

Gwynne. Gwynne tends to be a south Wales name with strong presence in Radnorshire, while Wynn tends to be a north Wales name, with Denbighshire having a strong presence.

Jones

Jones is by far the most common surname in Wales. The surname originated from the name John. The name is particularly concentrated in the north of Wales.

Lewis

Lewis is a shorter, anglicized version of Llewelyn. This form became popularized in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. There is less distribution of the name in the north of Wales and greatest frequency of the name in Carmarthenshire and also southeast Wales.

Llewelyn

Llewelyn was an ancient Welsh forename and was popular because it was the name of early Welsh princes. The surname is most frequently found in Glamorgan and Pembroke.

Morgan

Morgan is from Old Welsh “Morcant” was a popular Welsh forename for many centuries. The surname is found throughout Wales but in small numbers in north Wales. It is more of a mid and south Wales name, with particular representation in Monmouthshire.

Pugh

Pugh derives from “ap Hugh” and is particularly concentrated in Merionethshire.

Price

The surname Price derives from “ap Rhys” and has the highest frequency in Radnorshire. The lowest amount of people surnamed Price are in northwest and southwest Wales.

Rees

Rhys was a common Welsh forename in medieval times. A number of Welsh princes and leaders had the name Rhys. The surname Rees has a strong presence in Glamorgan and the surname is seldom found in the north part of Wales.

Roberts

The Roberts surname is found throughout Wales but is most popular in north Wales, particularly Denbighshire.

Williams

Williams is another name with significant presence in the north, Anglesy and Caernarfon, and also southeast Wales, particularly Breconshire.

Things to Remember

- The absence of “ap” or “ab” does not mean the family adopted a permanent surname.
- Different naming patterns were often used in the same family.
- Some families used patronymics after adopting a permanent surname. Never assume a surname is a permanent surname.

- Traditional Welsh names were sometimes anglicized, so look for people using both Welsh and anglicized versions of Welsh names.
- Girls' names frequently came from boys' names.
- It appears that both *verch* and *ap* could be used at the same time in women's names.
- Some families and people did not adopt a fixed surname until quite late.

For Further Reading

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